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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 141 (2014) 1127 – 1133

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCLTA 2013

Identity Development Processes and Socio-Cultural Contexts. A Study with Second Generation Adolescents

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Abstract

The increasing presence of second-generation adolescents should impose a reflection on acculturation (Redfield, Linton & Herskovitz, 1936; Liebkind, 2001) and on identity development processes. The first concept refers to that bidirectional change that occurs when two different ethno-cultural groups come into prolonged contact, influencing each other and leading to cultural changes that involve individuals, groups and socio-cultural contexts. Regarding identity, a relevant question is related to social identity (Tajfel, 1981) as the self-image that derives from group belonging, combined with the value and the emotional meaning associated with that membership. Indeed, the second generation's cultural systems of reference may represent very different realities: from those to which they feel suspended (Baumann, 1999) to foundations upon which they could develop models of biculturalism (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). In this framework, the aim of our study was to explore the attitudes that a sample of second generation adolescents has on: integration processes; the culture of origin; the Italian culture. Our hypothesis is that these representations are affected by the specific socio-cultural context in which the subjects of the sample live. Specifically, we compared a city in northern Italy (which would seem characterized by a substantial institutional opening to the recognition of the regular immigrants' civil rights and for critical social relationships) to a Sicilian town (which would seem characterized by the positive relationships between immigrants and natives and by an inadequate institutional interest towards immigrants). Results seem to delineate an articulated framework oriented to biculturalism and dual membership. The data also seems to confirm our hypothesis concerning the influence of the socio-cultural life context.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.

Keywords: Intergroup relationships, identity, prejudices, acculturation;

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1. Introduction

It is difficult to give a comprehensive definition of second generations. In general, it comprises migrant children who were born in Italy or in their country of origin, some of whom began their education here, while others did not; minors who came to Italy without parents or relatives – refugees and adopted children- or children of a mixed marriage. In Italy, the growing presence of second generations testifies the processes of stable settlement in Italy regarding first generation migrants and it poses the question of acculturation dynamics (Liebkind, 2001). In this regard, long lasting contact (Allport, 1954) between persons and groups with different cultural backgrounds entails a mutual change based on reciprocal influence in terms of ethno-cultural adaptation (Berry, 1997). The ways in which this process may come true may even have very different connotations and it represents an important and complex issue at different levels.

In this sense, integration could be a priority if we intend it as a social and a psychological process leading to the acquisition of norms and values pertaining to the Italian culture and to maintain those of their parents at the same time. Indeed, the reference cultural systems of second generation may represent very different realities: from those to which they feel suspended (Baumann, 1999) to those in which they are foundations upon and through which they could develop models of biculturalism (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). It is a complex psychological and social phenomenon that stimulates the creation of a multicultural society and enhances differences rather than their standardization. It also encourages new and more advanced forms of cultural development.

Moreover, these processes call into question the issues related to double affiliation and, therefore, Social Identity development (Tajfel, 1981). This identity dimension is, indeed, a self-representation related to social roles, recognized status and knowledge which concurs to define what is our place in the world (Sarbin, 1968). In this framework, the Social Identity of second generations is related to different factors, considered not as singular elements but together: the cultural humus in which it is rooted; the role and salience of memberships, the meaning of parent and Italian culture; the social representation (Moscovici, 1984) of second generations; the feedbacks that come from the ‘others’. It is a multifaceted issue that could have in Dual Identity Model (Gaertner, Dovidio, Banker, Houlette, Johnson & McGlynn, 2000) a possible model functional to maintain double affiliation without denying important memberships in identity development.

2. Method

2.1. Aim and hypothesis

The aim of this study was to explore the representational framework that a group of second generation students, from different secondary schools of two cities in Northern and Southern Italy, has on: migration experience (their or that of their parents); quality of integration processes; parent's and Italian culture; some identity and group dimensions. Specifically, it intended to test the hypothesis that these representations correlate with ‘actual’ and ‘future’ identity dimensions and are affected by the specific cultural context where the subjects of our sample were settled.

2.2. Participants

Research was carried out with a group of second generation students, 104 altogether, coming from different secondary schools (55.8% Vocational School; 44.2% Senior High School) of two cities in Northern (55.8%) and Southern (44.2%) Italy. More than three out of four (78.8%) of the participants ($M=22.1$; $F=77.9\%$), aged between 13 and 22 ($M=16.71$) attended first three-year school period and for the remaining part last two years (respectively 12.5% and 8.7%). Data on where they were born (73.1% foreign vs. 26.9% Italian city) and on where they obtained junior high school certificate (84.6% in Italy vs. 15.4% in Country of origin) testify of a prevalent second generation that came in Italy in preschool age. In relation to who makes the decision to emigrate in Italy, according to average period of settlement in this Country ($M=9.5$) and to sample's adolescence age, most of respondents referred to family (the whole 30.8%; father 34.6%; mother 22.1%). Moreover, they stated that prevalent emigration reasons, according to the Italian migration literature, lie in finding a job (53.8%) and in family reunion (27.9%). The question

related to Italian citizenship is characterized by a 70.2% who declared not having it, a 27.9% who have it and a 1.9% who did not answer. More than half (56.7%) of those who did not have Italian citizenship thought of acquiring it in the future, the rest is in doubt (30.8%) or doesn't have this intention (12.5%). Although future projects are uncertain for 16.3%, they seem well-defined enough for the rest: 36.5% thought of completing studies; less than half (47.2%) projected themselves into a not oncoming future and spoke about the importance to get a job (26% stated that the job will be a personal and social tool for achievement and 21.2% thought that it will be the condition to start a family).

2.3. Materials and techniques

Data was collected by a semi-structured questionnaire containing: **I)** background questions, aimed at collecting specific data in order to draw an appropriate profile of participants' socio/cultural features, useful for the construction of possible research variables (Licciardello, 1994); **II)** a group of open questions on: second generation future plans; the meaning they assign to integration; the way in which they spend their free-time; **III)** a group of closed questions on migration experience and on friendship; **IV)** a group of items (range 1=*total disagreement* 7=*total agreement* with "mead point"=4) in order to measure the representational framework related to: quality of integration processes; parent's and Italian culture; **V)** four Semantic Differentials (Di Nuovo & Licciardello, 1997) concerning the representation of *Actual Self* ("As I am"), *Future Self* ("As I will be"), "*Peers belonging to the group of origin are...*" and "*Italian peers are ...*". The materials were administered by the researcher in a face to face setting.

2.4. Procedures

Data analysis was carried out by SPSS 20 for Windows, using Manova, Pearson's "r" for correlation analysis and one test. We calculated the mean values of each item for the data obtained with the semi-structured questionnaire. Regarding the Semantic Differentials, we calculated the: 1) reliability with Cronbach's alpha: Actual Self ($\alpha=.760$), Future Self ($\alpha=.857$), Italian peers ($\alpha=.899$), Peers belonging to the group of origin ($\alpha=.872$); 2) and the average sum of each pair of opposite adjectives scores.

3. Results

3.1. Quality of integration processes

With regard to integration, for more than half of the sample seems characterized by passivity, in the sense that they referred to the need to accustom (43.3%) and to assimilate (11%) themselves to the Italian culture in order to be accepted by locals. The necessity to balance parents and the Italian culture is expressed by 34.6% and a low percentage (10%) declared to be unable to define this concept. According to Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and its developments (Amir, 1976; Pettigrew, 1997) real and effective integration processes could be realized through intimate contact as that which characterizes friendship. In relation to this aspect, the majority of our sample stated they had Italian friends, either exclusively (22.1%) or in many cases (58.7%), and those seemingly are close friendship since they invited their friends at home (*even*: 28.8%; *often*: 31.7%) and they are invited by them (*even* 27.9%; *often* 42.3%).

3.2. Parent's and Italian culture

Our sample (MANOVA with 3 within factors $DF=2,206$ $F=4.39$ $p=.047$) approved with medium score the preference to maintain some parent's culture aspects in family context and the Italian culture in the relationships with peers ($M=5.13$). With slightly lower scores were approved the items on the tendency to select and include aspects of the two culture that are more similar to personal way of thinking ($M=5.01$) and those on a close feeling aspects of the two culture that are more similar to personal way of thinking ($M=5.01$) and those on a close feeling with parent's culture ($M=4.95$). Specifically, in stating the reasons of origin's culture importance (MANOVA with 5 Within factors $DF=4,412$ $F=44.71$ $p<.001$), second generation students approved moderately the fact that it is the basis of personal identity ($M=5.26$) and, in a lower fashion, because it is not fair to abandon the course showed by ancestors ($M=5.12$). Rejected the item: it is important to strive to fit in with the other culture, in order to reduce, as

much as possible, integration problems ($M=3.39$); I never arise this question ($M=3.37$); It is not a relevant question ($M=2.52$). To support the openness, even moderate, toward parent's culture are data on their attitudes on requests of information about culture of origin (MANOVA with 5 Within factors $DF=4,412$ $F=110.72$ $p<.001$). In details, they approved with medium scores both the propensity to face the question highlighting positive and negative aspects ($M=5.52$) and the possibility to talk about origin's culture ($M=5.41$). Moreover, they expressed disagreement in relation to: considering parent's culture superior to the Italian one ($M=2.82$); preferring not to talk about parent's culture because they do not share several of its aspects ($M=2.28$); rejecting parent's culture ($M=1.97$). The data on the comparison between second generation students from two cities was very interesting ($p=.001$). In fact, sample of Southern Italy, compared to those of Northern, attributed significantly lower scores to the following items: preferring not to talk about parent's culture because they do not share several of its aspects ($M=1.91$ vs. $M=2.57$) ($p=.026$); rejecting parent's culture ($M=1.57$ vs. $M=2.29$) ($p=.019$); considering parent's culture superior to the Italian one ($M=2.11$ vs. $M=3.38$) ($p=.001$).

Data seem to highlight a moderate trend towards the integration of the two cultures (MANOVA with 4 within factors $DF=3,309$ $F=26.28$ $p<.001$). Indeed, the sample approved with medium-low scores the item on improvement and maintaining the two cultures ($M=4.78$) and rejected both options on preserving exclusively the Italian culture ($M=2.95$) or that of parents ($M=3.74$). These last two item are refused more by the sample of Southern Italy than by that of Northern (respectively: $M=2.57$ vs. $M=3.26$, $p=.025$; $M=2.91$ vs. $M=4.40$, $p<.001$).

3.1. Selves, Italian and group of origin's peers and correlation analysis

In general, our sample seems to have a moderately positive Self representation. In particular, Future Self-assessment is higher than that of Actual Self ($M=5.58$ vs. $M=5.02$) ($p<.001$) and both these identity dimensions are considered better than group dimensions (in all cases $p<.001$). Score assigned to peers belonging to the group of origin is medium-low ($M=4.77$) and that assigned to the Italian's peers is lower ($M=4.37$) (the first is evaluated more positively than the second: $p=.002$).

The correlation analysis between Selves and group dimensions with item on parent's culture pointed out that: a) a better Future Self representation is rooted to parent's culture ($r=.198$; $p<.044$) and also characterized by the need to combine aspects of the two cultures that are more similar to the personal way of thinking ($r=.285$; $p<.003$); b) the better the evaluation of the Italian peer group the more the importance to balance the coexistence of parent's and Italian culture ($r=.234$; $p<.017$); c) the more they assessed peers belonging to the group of origin the more they felt close with parent's culture ($r=.225$; $p<.021$). These data seem to highlight that parent's culture represents the anchorage of identity development and that a positive actual and future Self representation has the capacity to revisit parent's culture combining it with the Italian one.

The correlation between Selves, group dimensions and items on the importance of parent's culture revealed that the higher was the evaluation of both Selves dimensions the more subjects considered relevant the question of origin's culture (respectively $r=-.227$; $p=.020$ e $r=-.236$; $p=.016$). In addition, the more they assessed Future Self the more they agreed on the importance to maintain origin's culture because it is at the basis of personal identity ($r=.315$; $p=.001$).

In relation to attitudes on requests of information about origin's culture, Selves and the group of origin peers dimension were positively correlated with the pride to speak with someone of their origin's culture (respectively $r=.288$; $p=.003$, $r=.236$; $p=.016$; $r=.319$; $p=.001$) and with the capacity to tackle this talking point easily highlighting positive and negative aspects (respectively $r=.393$; $p<.001$; $r=.372$; $p<.001$; $r=.240$; $p=.014$). On the contrary, the lesser was the evaluation of identity dimensions the greater was the agreement on the preference to not talk about this argument because they did not share several aspects (respectively $r=-.353$; $p<.001$ e $r=-.280$; $p=.004$). These data seem reveal that a positive and critical (in a constructive sense) attitude on parent's culture were the basis for a good representation of Selves and of peers belonging to the group of origin. Data on Identity, group dimensions and relationships between origin's culture and the Italian one showed a tendency to de-categorization, that is to consider people as single subject instead of members of a cultural group when more was the evaluation of peers belonging to the group of origin ($r=.200$; $p<.041$), of parent's culture ($r=.234$; $p<.017$) and of the idea to combine the two cultures ($r=.330$; $p<.001$). Probably, when the process of identity development is based on the

awareness to be a unique person not assimilated by a specific cultural group it is greater the capacity to consider the other as single subject, leaving a stereotyped representation.

4. Conclusion

Data analysis seemed to confirm our hypothesis and outline a comprehensive framework characterized by a certain level of complexity. First of all, it is interesting to highlight that a prevalent part of our sample was composed by adolescents that, according with Rumbaut classification (1997), could be defined “1.75 generation”, that is immigrants who came in Italy in preschool age. It is not an unimportant aspect because it means that they had a first socialization in their parent’s country and that origin’s culture represents, probably, their roots. In the framework of identity development process, the question of second generation poses the relevant issue of the way in which origins and Italian culture could coexist. In relation to this aspect, there is a discrepancy between the meaning assigned, by more than half of our sample, to the concept of integration (characterized by assimilation to Italian culture in order to be accepted by locals) and the tendency, though moderate, to find a way to combine the two cultures effectively. It is as our respondents experienced an integration based on the coexistence of their parent’s and the Italian culture but they had a representation of this concept that is equal assimilation. There is an inevitable question on this gap: is this an expression of a social representation (Moscovici, 1984) or a personal way to intend and to translate into practice this concept? Results seem to testify for the first hypothesis. Moreover, data on friendship with Italian peers showed close relationships that, including the conditions for an effective contact (Allport, 1954), should be able to reduce mutual prejudicial thinking.

In considering our results we have to point out that respondents are in adolescence age and, therefore, they are in a phase of identity “testing” and definition that could be more complex because of their dual cultural affiliation. Concerning this matter, data seem to highlight a process of maintaining and improving parent’s and Italian culture. In fact, in relation to their origin’s culture they considered it the basis of their personal identity and, at the same time, they expressed the ability to distance themselves from it in relation to not shared aspects. Regarding relationships between their parent’s and the Italian culture, their trend, even moderate, was towards the development of the two cultures, rejecting both the hypothesis to preserve only one of them or to consider one superior to the other. We could compare this process to those related to self-aspects defined by Mead (1934) ‘I’ and ‘Me’. In other words, ‘Me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others, in this case, those of the two cultures which they assume and ‘I’ is each one’s response of to it that gives the sense of freedom, initiative, self-position of an individual who is an active protagonist of learning and social change processes, able to concur to the achievement of interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

Regarding Selves dimensions, the subjects of our sample showed, in general, a moderately positive Actual and Future Self representation. Moreover, an in-depth analysis reveals that a positive self-image assessment correlates with: a consideration of parent’s culture as the basis of personal identity; the propensity to speak about this culture highlighting positive and negative aspects; the need to combine origins and Italian culture features. These data highlight a way to develop our sample identity that seems referred to Dual Identity model (Gaertner et al., 2000; Gaertner, Riek, Mania & Dovidio, 2007), according to which different cultural systems could coexist rather than cancelling each other mutually. In addition, the more the process of identity development is based on the improvement of the two cultures, to which there is a positive estimation without identification (Damigella, Eterno & Licciardello, 2010), the greater is the tendency to de-categorize (Brewer & Miller, 1984) that is to consider the others as a single person and not as members of a cultural group. This could concur to create a better quality of relationships less characterized by prejudices and stereotypes as it is confirmed by a research on immigrants living in south-eastern Sicily (Damigella, Eterno & Licciardello, 2010). To confirm the influence of the specific cultural context where second generation immigrants of our sample were settled, data showed that respondents of Southern Italy, compared to those of Northern, approved more their parent’s culture and the necessity to integrate the two cultures without a predominance of one over the other. According to researches carried out in Sicily (Licciardello, Di Marco & Scuderi, 2004; Licciardello, Damigella, Di Marco & Mauceri, 2005; Licciardello, Damigella & Di Marco, 2006; Brown, Capozza & Licciardello, 2007), a possible explanation could be, in part, ascribed to a general positive relationships between migrants and locals both at interpersonal and intergroup level. In conclusion, we

could say that our participants seem to deal with the complex issue of identity development in a competently active way, characterized by a dual affiliation based on improvement of the two cultures without identification with one of them. This process could lead to perceive themselves and the others as single subjects and not as members of a cultural group (or less) and, therefore, it could concur to reduce stereotypes and prejudices.

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